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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: POLITICAL PARTIES RALLY THEIR BASES IN  
PEACEFUL MAY DAY FESTIVITIES

REF: A. COLOMBO 00812

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 00807

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: This year's May Day--a traditional forum for parties to hold pep rallies to tout their accomplishments, outline future moves, and lambaste opponents--passed without incident this past weekend. The various rallies in Colombo sponsored by the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and the opposition United National Party (UNP) highlighted the tensions that exist between the allies and foes alike, touched on the sensitive political issues of the day, and was heavy on expected party propaganda and rhetoric. The JVP in particular used the holiday rallies to underscore their opposition to the proposed joint mechanism for tsunami relief in the North and East. End summary.

May Day Latest Venue for Political Jockeying in Colombo

[1](#)2. (SBU) All of Sri Lanka's major political players held May Day celebrations and rallies across the country on May 1, with the greatest concentration occurring in Colombo. Despite some worries about possible violence, the day passed peacefully, albeit under the watch of almost 5,000 armed policemen in the capital. The most interesting aspect of the day was the fact that, unlike last year, the two main partners of the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) decided to hold separate rallies: President Chandrika Kumaratunga's SLFP rallied on Colombo's Galle Face Green, while the JVP rally took place in a near-by park. Even the UNP--which arguably does not have as strong ties to the labor unions that May Day traditionally honors--held its own rally for the first time since 1993. Attendance figures for the various rallies remain uncertain, especially given that the parties reportedly resorted to various tactics to inflate their numbers in an effort to demonstrate their strength and outdo the other parties. The various rallies each drew thousands of party activists, many of which were bussed in from across the country with the promise of a free meal and other small incentives. Party marches reportedly devolved into a competition to see whose procession would take the longest to complete. According to party insiders, parade organizers bussed marchers who reached the end of the parade route back to the beginning in an effort to prolong the event and give the impression of higher attendance.

[1](#)3. (U) On top of the usual sops to labor issues common at Sri Lankan May Day celebrations, more prescient themes, such as post-tsunami reconstruction and the peace process, also figured prominently at the various rallies. Although she did not personally attend the SLFP rally, President Kumaratunga released a statement that vaguely called for a new compensation formula for workers, the establishment of a benefit insurance scheme, salary increases for public and private sector workers, the end of political victimization, and the guaranteeing of rights and safety of expatriate workers. However, she went on to honor the victims of the tsunami and claimed that reconstruction and rehabilitation

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following the catastrophe must be the priorities of the government. Speaking at the rally, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and Tourism, Investment Promotion and Industries Minister Anura Bandanaraikie -- two prominent politicians often mentioned as possible successors to Kumaratunga -- defended the UPFA's performance and rationalized the decision for the SLFP and the JVP to hold separate May Day rallies. Rajapakse defended the government's questionable policy of prohibiting reconstruction within a 100 meter buffer zone of the coast, dubiously claiming that the government had the support from tsunami victims and the international community for the decision, according to press reports. The JVP similarly downplayed its decision to hold a separate rally, and JVP leader Amarasinghe stressed that the party was "bound to uphold and protect the SLFP-JVP agreement." In pointed reference to the proposed joint mechanism for tsunami relief between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government, he warned, however, that the JVP would reconsider its commitment if the coalition government tries to move

beyond what is agreed to in the manifesto. At the UNP rally, opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe predictably attacked the government for its poor handling of the economy and post-tsunami reconstruction and called for the government to resign.

#### May Day in the North

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14. (U) Not to be outdone by the politicking in Colombo, an estimated 50,000 people took part in a peaceful rally in Jaffna, and the LTTE sponsored its own versions of May Day celebrations in Kilinochchi and Vavuniya. Post-tsunami reconstruction -- including the appeal for a the passing of the joint mechanism -- and protests against the murder of prominent Tamil journalist Sivaram (Ref. A), not surprisingly figured more prominently in the rallies held in the North.

#### Comment

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15. (SBU) This year's May Day celebration was light on substance and new policy initiatives, but heavy on rhetoric and one-upmanship -- much like Sri Lankan politics in general. The decision by the JVP and the SLFP to hold separate rallies -- and the subsequent efforts both sides put into downplaying it -- is indicative of the growing tensions the governing coalition is facing. As for the opposition, the UNP's ability to garner a respectable crowd for its first May Day rally in over a decade -- especially for a holiday usually reserved for more socialist-leaning parties -- could be a sign of the more aggressive opposition campaign the party has been threatening to launch (Ref. B). Meanwhile, the contrast between the North's focus on the ethnic conflict and the South's emphasis on pageantry and platitudes highlights the disconnect between the aims and concerns of the two regions.

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